

Statement

Opening Detention Centers Has Revealed the Still-Going Humanitarian Catastrophe:

Over **112,414** Individuals Are Still Forcibly Disappeared at the Hands of the Assad Regime



© Rami ALSayed

Saturday 28 December 2024

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyzes in Syria.

On November 27, 2024, the Military Operations Command launched Operation Deter Aggression, in which several cities that had been under the control of the Assad regime were gradually captured.

- On November 29, Aleppo city was captured.
- On December 5, Hama city was captured.
- On December 7, Homs city was captured.
- On December 8, Damascus city was captured, driving Bashar Assad to flee to Russia.

In the course of these operations, prisons and security branches were opened as soon as a city was fully captured, with all the detainees being freed. Our teams in Syria closely monitored these releases, and have, in fact, been in contact with hundreds of released detainees and their families in order to document recent developments and collect more information.

SNHR'S EFFORTS IN DOCUMENTING ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE

Since 2011, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has spared no effort to document cases of arbitrary arrest, most of which have been subsequently categorized as enforced disappearances. To that end, a team within SNHR has been dedicated to working solely on this issue on a daily basis, building a massive database based on using a precise methodology that draws upon accounts from survivors and victims' families, as well as other documents and evidence. For almost 14 years, we have maintained, utilized, and analyzed the contents of this vast database as the basis for hundreds of reports we've published on arbitrarily arrested detainees and forcibly disappeared persons, including monthly reports which we've released at the end of every month covering the preceding month for over a decade.

ADVANCED DATABASE

SNHR has established and maintained a versatile and advanced database with the aim of comprehensively documenting all the details related to detainees and forcibly disappeared persons. The **database's sophisticated categorization features** help to conveniently filter the data as required, such as when issuing figures or preparing reports. One of these categorization parameters is the **status/fate** of a detainee, with each detainee being assigned one of eight main statuses:

1. Released
2. Forcibly disappeared
3. Died due to torture
4. Executed
5. Still detained
6. Released, but was called up for military conscription
7. Released, but died later due to torture inflicted during detention
8. Unassigned

Each of these eight classifications has further sub-classifications. For instance, ‘released’ detainees include those who were released in various contexts, such as having fully served their sentences, being released as part of settlements, under a presidential amnesty, or as part of prisoner exchange deals. All of these classifications have been regularly updated through SNHR’s daily monitoring process for the past years.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND DOCUMENTATION METHODOLOGY

SNHR draws upon data provided by **survivors and victims’ families as the main source of information**. In addition, we rely on primary eyewitnesses and documents collected from various sources. All information gathered is subjected to a process of strict and rigorous cross-checking and verification to ensure its authenticity and reliability. Due to the complex nature of the documentation process, building and maintaining a comprehensive and accurate database on detainees and forcibly disappeared persons is an intensive, long-term endeavor that requires years of painstaking methodical and systematic work. Added to that have been further complications particular to the Syrian context, which require even more work to accurately document all cases.

Thanks to our rigorous methodology, SNHR has been credited as **a principal source** for information on the state of human rights in Syria, with **many of the resolutions** issued by the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly citing SNHR’s data as source material. In addition, SNHR’s reports have been cited in many reports by distinguished **international human rights groups**, and in reports issued by the **foreign ministries of several** countries, as well as the European Union.

INDICATORS OF A HUMAN CATASTROPHE

Although thousands of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons have been released with the opening of detention centers across all Syria's governorates, the aftermath of these developments has validated our fears of the potential tragic fate of the overwhelming majority of forcibly disappeared persons in Syria. To expand on this subject:

I. A number of forcibly disappeared persons have been registered as dead in the civil registry records since 2018

In **early-2018**, the Assad regime began registering the deaths of forcibly disappeared persons in the state civil registry's records. Many victims' families were naturally shocked to discover that their loved ones had been registered as dead in this way without having received any notification or having been given the victims' bodies and without being provided with any clarification on the circumstances of their death.

SNHR was the first human rights group to release a report detailing these systematic practices and directly accusing the Assad regime of killing forcibly disappeared persons. The group has worked for years to collect data on the death of forcibly disappeared persons with the help of civil registry offices' employees.

- In **2022**, [SNHR published another report](#) further confirming that the Assad regime was continuing to register the deaths of forcibly disappeared persons without notifying the families of their loved ones' fate.
- **Between 2018 and** November 2024, we collected over **3,000 death certificates** issued for forcibly disappeared persons. This distressingly high figure (which accounts for over three percent of all persons documented by SNHR as having been forcibly disappeared by the Assad regime) is made even worse by the fact that these deaths had been registered in different areas at different times. This clearly indicates that the Assad regime was killing forcibly disappeared persons in its detention centers on a daily basis.

II. Large-scale data on mass executions of forcibly disappeared persons

In **2023**, SNHR obtained a large quantity of data revealing that thousands of forcibly disappeared persons had been sentenced to death by the regime.

- These sentences were either the result of show trials which lacked the most basic standards of justice, or were handed down without any trials at all.
- With the help of internal sources within the Assad regime, SNHR was able to gain access to central data for the Assad regime, including civil registry records, and information from the Minister of Defense, and from other institutions.

- This data confirmed that executions took place in multiple sites, most notably **Sednaya Military Prison**, the regime's infamous '**1st Military Prison**', which was notorious for being one of the Assad regime's primary centers for systematic and calculated killing in Syria.

III. Opening prisons and detention centers in Operation Deter Aggression

We monitored the numbers of detainees released from the regime prisons and detention centers in major cities in the course of Operation Deter Aggression:

- **On November 29**, releases were monitored in Aleppo city.
- **On December 5**, releases were monitored in Hama city
- **On December 7**, releases were monitored in Homs city
- **On December 8**, releases were monitored in Damascus city.

By the end of the offensive, about **24,200 individuals** had been released from all prisons and detention centers according to our estimates.

Despite these large number of releases, however, the database on SNHR's website suggests that the number of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons was **136,614 individuals as of August 2024**.

According to these figures, about **112,414 individuals** of those held by the Assad regime had still not been found after detention centers had been opened.

IV. MASS GRAVES WERE FOUND CONTAINING REMAINS OF THOUSANDS OF VICTIMS WHO HAVE BEEN EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLED

In the last weeks of December 2024, several mass graves were found in Syria. These mass graves contained the dead bodies/remains of victims who died due to torture, or were field-executed, or were killed in a systematic manner. Indeed, these graves serve as definitive evidence for the systematic crimes that the Assad regime has committed. There are even some indicators suggesting the existence of more mass graves that will be uncovered in the near future, which reflects the sheer volume and magnitude of the crimes that have been committed over the past years.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above data and observations, we can conclude that the overwhelming majority of people forcibly disappeared by the regime died due to torture, medical negligence, and brutal imprisonment conditions, or were executed. These individuals are still classified as **forcibly disappeared persons** since their bodies have not been returned to their families, and their fates have not been conclusively clarified. It will take intensive and continuous efforts to reveal the full truth about the fate of each of these victims.

Enforced disappearance only ends when the fate of a victim is fully revealed, and/or their body or remains are returned to their family, while ensuring that all those responsible for such crimes are held accountable, and that the victims and their families are fairly and properly compensated.

RECOMMENDATION TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF FORCIBLY DISAPPEARED PERSONS

1. Reveal information and prioritize families' right to discover the fate of their loved ones

A. Launch comprehensive and independent investigations

- Investigate all officers, field personnel, and administrative and security leaders who were involved, whether directly or indirectly, in enforced disappearance practices.
- Involve international experts to ensure transparency and honesty.

B. Pinpoint burial sites and uncover dead bodies

- Compel former regime personnel who have been apprehended to reveal the sites of mass graves and disclose any records documenting the transfer or burial of victims.
- Utilize new technologies to pinpoint the burial sites.

C. Families' rights

- Ensure the rights of families to have and obtain accurate information on the circumstances of their loved ones' disappearance and/or death.
- Provide psychological and social support for the families to ensure they can receive and come to terms with such traumatic and devastating facts.

2. Document the details of the deaths of forcibly disappeared persons

Ensuring the accuracy of information on deaths helps with holding those responsible accountable, and ensures that the rights of victims and their families are respected and properly addressed.

A. Clarify the circumstances of death

- Identify the causes of each death, whether torture, medical negligence, or execution or extrajudicial killing.
- Investigate the role of the security and medical entities in facilitating or covering up these crimes.

B. Provide official documents

- Provide death records, administrative correspondence, and prison records related to forcibly disappeared persons.
- Verify documents through an independent review process to ensure their authenticity.

C. Return victims' bodies or remains to their families

- Return every victim's body or remains to their loved ones in a humane and respectful manner, and provide official reports outlining the circumstances of the victim's death.
- Provide emotional and logistical support for families during the process of returning their loved ones' bodies or remains

3. Mass graves

The mass graves in Syria are vital sites of physical evidence of organized crime, which necessitates that they be treated according to a nuanced methodology, including:

A. Monitor and document sites

- Use satellite technology, as well as survivors' and others' accounts, and cooperate with eyewitnesses to pinpoint burial sites.
- Protect sites of mass graves to ensure no tampering with evidence.

B. Analyze criminal evidence

- Conduct DNA tests to cross-check bodies or human remains with data on victims.
- Document physical evidence on these sites to submit this as evidence to the competent courts.

C. Ensure transparent investigations

- Provide detailed periodic reports outlining the findings of these investigations to the victims' families and the international community.

4. Investigations and accountability

Legal accountability to ensure no impunity is paramount. This includes:

A. Establish mixed or international courts

- Establish competent courts to prosecute perpetrators of enforced disappearance crimes whether at the national or international levels.
- Cooperate with the International Criminal Court (ICC) to try crimes against humanity.

B. Issue international arrest warrants

- Prosecute officials involved in crimes in Syria and overseas in cooperation with Interpol.
- Ensure no impunity for criminals by freezing the assets of those involved in perpetrating crimes and holding them accountable in whichever state they seek asylum.

C. Compensate the victims and their families

- Set up an international fund to compensate the victims and their families financially and socially.
- Provide psychological and social support services to help families recover.

5. Ensure non-recurrence of crimes

To ensure the non-recurrence of the tragedy of forcibly disappeared persons in Syria, long-term legal and structural measures must be taken, including:

A. Reform security and judicial institutions

- Dismantle the former regime's security apparatus that has been involved in violations, and restructure these agencies under international supervision.
- introduce strict laws prohibiting enforced disappearance and ensuring that those responsible for any such crimes are held fully accountable.

B. Enact constitutional reforms

- Include texts that protect human rights and prohibit grave human rights violations in the new constitution of Syria.

C. Raise awareness and build capabilities

- Launch awareness programs in Syria and in the international community to document crimes and ensure they are never committed again.
- Train national personnel to use international legal tools to address violations.

6. Promote international cooperation

A. Cooperate with expert international organizations

- Work with organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), and the UN Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria, to provide technical and field assistance.
- Exchange information with international human rights organization to ensure comprehensive and joint documentation.

B. Sign international agreements

- Sign cooperation agreements with states that may be hosting some of those involved in crimes or eyewitnesses to crimes to ensure access to information and accountability.
- Syria must join and ratify the international treaties and instruments that the Assad regime had failed to adhere to, particularly Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance that aims to put an end to such horrendous crimes and strengthen legal protection mechanisms against such crimes.



SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



info@snhr.org
www.snhr.org

No justice without accountability

© Syrian Network For Human Rights (SNHR),
December 2024

